

HIGHLANDER RESEARCH AND EDUCATION CENTER

1625 RIVERSIDE DRIVE, KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE (37915)

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Dear Friend of Highlander:

If you'll just turn the page, you'll find a warm, impressive, exciting story of our Workshop on Negro Folk Music, held in October of 1965 at Highlander Center.

We of the Highlander Board are especially proud of one paragraph from this front-page article in "The Southern Patriot." As you will read, Alan Lomax, America's great authority on folk music, expressed his joy over the involvement of young people from the freedom movement in efforts to preserve old folk forms. Then the story goes on to say:

The folk revival actually dates back to the late 1950's when Guy Carawan, California-reared folk singer with family roots in the South, joined the staff of the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee. From there, he took adaptations of old spirituals--including "We Shall Overcome"--to the communities where the students began to demonstrate in 1960.

This is but another example of the seminal effect which Highlander has had on the civil rights movement in the South.

Another important aspect of Highlander's influence is pointed out in this article....the fact that music--so long a part of the Highlander tradition--serves as an effective bridge between Negro and white. At Highlander we haven't needed bridges; there everybody has always been together, in work and play. But it's good to know that we have helped create a bridge to bring people together throughout the South.

In all this, you -- our good friends -- have supplied the bone and sinew to keep us going. I hope you will enjoy reading about this Highlander Folk Music Workshop, and I should be pleased to receive your comments.

Cordially yours,

Charles G. Gomillion

Charles G. Gomillion
Chairman of the Board

Folk Music Work

Alan Lomax terms the effort to preserve old folk forms "one of the most exciting cultural developments in America."

Alan Lomax (right foreground) talks with Sam Block, Willie Peacock, and William McGee of Mississippi and Mable Hillery of the Georgia Sea Island Singers. Bernice Reagon, Guy Carawan, and Bennie Luchion are in rear. (Patriot Photos.)



KNOXVILLE, Tenn. — One of the interesting developments in the South today, although not yet widely publicized, is a new movement for the revival of true Negro folk music and other old cultural forms, such as dance and story.

The movement is being fed from three directions.

The moving force comes from young Southern Negroes who have come out of the freedom movement. Possessed of an inner freedom and sense of dignity won in struggle, they no longer feel ashamed of traditions of the past and have suddenly discovered a beauty and strength in the culture of their forefathers. They have determined that it not be lost.

Then there are the scholars, those who have long sought to preserve the varied cultural patterns of America, who now see in the youth a possibility of making their dreams come true.

And finally there are the young white people, from North and South, who have gone to work in the civil rights movement thinking they would be the teachers of downtrodden rural Negroes and have found instead that they are the pupils.

To them, Mainstream America suddenly seems unbearably sterile as they have found in a simple culture a human strength and joy in living that they never encountered in the middle class white world from which they came.

Representatives from all these groups met this fall in a workshop at Highlander Center here

in Knoxville to talk about what they can do to keep the old cultural forms alive and give them meaning for today.

The emphasis was not at all on selling the rest of the country on the value of Southern Negro culture. They say that has already been done.

"We have given the world a universal language in our music," said one workshop participant. "Everywhere people want to hear ragtime, jazz, blues, gospel music, but the root forms from which this music springs are being lost. Many Negro singers from the South draw big audiences all over the country—some of them promoted by commercial interests seeking profits, some by sincere folklorists and folk music lovers. But the people back home still think this music is something to be ashamed of."

The most immediate aim of the group is to bring the music produced by the Southern Negro back to the children of those who produced it—and in its original form.

They plan a series of community cultural festivals throughout the South, to give local musicians an appreciative audience in their own area and to help Southern Negroes see the richness of their own culture.

"We stand firmly opposed," says a manifesto adopted by the group at Highlander, "to those who hold that because Negroes are winning the civil rights fight they must be assimilated into the sterile ways of Main Street America. Po-

litical and economic progress does not have to mean conformity."

The workshop was organized by Mrs. Bernice Reagon, who came out of the Albany, Ga., civil rights movement, became one of the original freedom singers of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and a nationally acclaimed folk singer in her own right. Organizing with her was Guy Carawan, the white folk singer who helped give the freedom movement its songs.

Alan Lomax, the noted folklorist, was here, as was Dr. Willis James of Spelman College, Atlanta, a leading authority on folk culture of the Negro in America and Africa. Representatives also came from the Newport Folk Foundation, which sponsors the annual folk festival in Newport, R.I., and is helping to finance grass-roots festivals in the South.

The main participants, however, were the people from out in the field in the South: some of the Georgia Sea Island Singers and the Moving Star Hall Singers from Johns Island, S.C.; Esau Jenkins, who has devoted his life to getting Negroes registered to vote in the Charleston, S.C. area and knows that in music people find new strength; and some of the young people whose names are already legendary as pioneers in the freedom movement in the Deep South; Charles Sherrod from Southwest Georgia; Willie Peacock, Sam Block, William McGee from Mississippi; Bennie Luchion, from Gadsden, Ala.; Jerome Smith, from New Orleans.

shop at Highlander Center . . .

Lomax said the involvement of young people from the freedom movement in efforts to preserve the old folk forms is "one of the most exciting cultural developments in America."

"Here are people who know how to bring a community into flower — economically and politically," he said. "They have the know-how and the drive and they will do what no one else can do to keep this rich tradition alive."

The folk revival actually dates back to the late 1950's, when Guy Carawan, California - reared folk singer with family roots in the South, joined the staff of the old Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tenn.

From there, he took adaptations of old spirituals—including "We Shall Overcome" — to the communities where the students began to demonstrate in 1960. Each struggle in the South added its own songs to the freedom heritage — merging new music with that of the Negro church. Guy helped take the songs from one community to the other.

Later he and his wife went to live on Johns Island off the coast of Charleston, S.C. This island, relatively isolated from the mainland until 1930, preserves a very old tradition of spiritual singing, with many African overtones.

Guy came to love the island culture and helped the people develop a series of music festivals, including an annual one at Christmas time.

Later, along with Bernice Reagon and other freedom workers from SNCC and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, he organized a festival in Atlanta and then at Edwards, Miss. Many young organizers for the freedom movement came, and there found a new source of strength and power.

Among those who attended the Edwards festival were Willie Peacock and Sam Block, two of the original organizers of the current freedom movement in their native Mississippi. Peacock was just fresh from a year of study at Tuskegee Institute.

There he had been depressed by what he felt were the false values of the students — seeking, he thought, just to get ahead in the society as it exists, trying to forget their Negro heritage, scorning the African students at Tuskegee.

Peacock and Block decided the old culture of the Negro in the South and its African roots were sources of pride.

Last summer along with William McGee they organized a three-day festival in the Mississippi Delta. Negroes came from miles around and sang the old songs, told the old stories, saw an exhibition of Negro and African art, enjoyed an old-fashioned slavery cookout.

"A people can draw strength from each other," Peacock wrote in a report, "when they participate together in the singing of the inspiring songs of generations past and present."

The greatest difficulty the folk revivalists encounter is a widespread rejection of the old culture by younger Negroes. To them it represents old oppression, and they are ashamed of it.

At the 1964 festival in Atlanta there was heated controversy on this point. Charles Sherrod put into words the question many young freedom workers felt.

"Why? Why sing those songs here?" he asked.

This fall, Sherrod helped draft the official manifesto from the workshop here which said:

"We must face the fact that the Negro has been brainwashed, turned against his cultural heritage because of white-dominated teaching in the schools and in churches, and because of the distorted way in which his music has been presented by the mass communications industry. . . . It will be our attempt . . . to counteract this feeling of shame and this mis-education, and thereby to renew the interest of the Negro community in its own artistic output."

He like many others have decided that appreciation of the old culture does not mark one as "Uncle Tom." Actually, it works just the other way, many militant Negroes say.

"We all know," the Rev. Andrew Young, SCLC leader, has said, "that you can't trust a Negro on a negotiating committee who doesn't like his people's music. We found that out in Birmingham . . ."



FREEDOM WORKERS and folklore authorities gather to plan ways to take Negro folk music back to the people of the South. At left, Charles Sherrod (standing) makes a point as Bill Saunders and Esau Jenkins of Johns Island, S.C., listen.



At center, folk singers Bernice Reagon and Eleanor Walden, vice-president and president of the Atlanta Folk Music Society, are enthralled by demonstration of "root" music.

Folk Music . . .

"A bridge toward a prideful and democratic meeting ground for Negro and white people of the South."



BETWEEN SESSIONS at folk music workshop, the participants manned a variety of instruments—wash tubs, drums, flutes. This impromptu quartet includes (from left) Mrs. Bessie Jones of the Georgia Sea Island Singers, Sam Block, Willie Peacock, Bennie Luchion. (Patriot Photos)

Although the strong group pride that pervades the folk revival movement would be described by some as "nationalistic," it is by no means anti-white. The statement at Highlander also said:

"In our folk music, we will discover a bridge toward a prideful and democratic meeting ground with the white people of the South. The fact is that in Southern folklore there has never been a Jim Crow line. Songs, stories, traditions and dialects were swapped back and forth between the two peoples.

...
"We look forward to the time when Negro and white folk artists will swap songs on the same platforms and at the same picnics, matching their skills and perhaps collaborating to produce songs of unheard-of excellence."

Some people think the bridge is already forming. Of the approximately 700 people who attended

the Johns Island festival last Christmas, one third were white people from Charleston. At the Mississippi Delta festival last summer, one white plantation owner came and brought his whole family.

Some might say this is just the old paternalistic pattern — that white people have always gone to the Negro churches, for example, to "hear the colored folks sing."

But since then, the freedom movement has intervened. Because of the impact and strength of this movement, there is a new and deeper meaning for white listeners.

The reaction of Mrs. Ruby Bishop, a Knoxville white woman who attended the workshop here, is revealing. She wrote in the Highlander newsletter:

"As soon as I entered the room and looked around, it was obvious

which of us were local citizens. We stuck out like sore thumbs with our stiff backs, strained expressions and conventional dress.

"The program came from persons sitting around on chairs and floor who wore on their faces an openness, a relaxation, an honesty of expression like persons who have removed from their lives the energy-consuming pretenses of our society. . . .

"Soon I realized that I was angry; shaken to my roots, for whatever potential I ever had for such freedom of expression was largely squeezed out by whatever forces had shaped me.

"I could readily see why those friends of mine who are constantly working with such people maintain their high morale. They feed their souls through these contacts. . . ."

—This article reprinted from the Southern Patriot, Southern Conference Education Fund.

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